

INTEGRITY IN SPEECH AND A BRUISE, IF THERE IS SUCH A THING

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I

I'm hoping you can settle a disagreement. It's a disagreement I've been having with my cousin, concerning an English oak. We planted it when we were nippers. And now I wish we hadn't, because on account of that tree we've fallen out in a big way, my cousin Chester and I. There's no doubt that it spoiled Christmas for a start. Ask anyone who was with us. Grandma is as blind as a bat, and even she was aghast at the sight of the vast chasm that had opened up between us. Just before we sat down for lunch, she pulled me aside and said to me, she said:

"You want to know something about this family James?"

I bent down and placed a hand on her frail knee.

"Tomlinsons don't go hopping into bed with pretty girls that are betrothed to their cousins. It's not the done thing at all," she said.

"Now, James, it's no use playing innocent. You don't come to be an old hag like me without having seen this sort of business before. And having seen it before, you realise you have to get on top of it at once. Stop that squirming James. You will do just as your grandmother, with her wisdom of years, asks of you. You will do us all a favour and see if Chester is decent enough to forgive you. Off you go at once, and keep your mischievous gaze averted from that eye candy of his."

If only I had slept with his fiancé. At least then we would know which of us was in the wrong. You must understand how close Chester and I have always been. We spent some of the happiest days of our youth together. So to think that he can't so much as look me in the eye now without shaking his head reproachfully - it simply can't go on. But I'm at a loss how to fix it. That's why I'm appealing to you. What we need is a neutral third party to see which of us has got the wrong end of this whole argument. If it is I, so be it. Give it to me straight. And if it Chester, well then, knowing him as I do, I would venture that he too is man enough to let the thing go. One of us must be wrong, and own that they are wrong, so that all can be well between us, and so that Grandma can once again preside over the joyous family occasions that have always been the tradition with Tomlinsons. Thanks ever so much,

in advance. You don't know how much this means. Here, let me run you through it.

What happened was this. Chester had come to my place one night to sample some whiskey and tell me about a spot of trouble he was having with his sweetheart. I'm a year older, you see, and only too glad to offer Chester my cousinly advice on affairs of any kind. I wouldn't say that I, the bachelor that I am, have managed fully to wrap my mind around the many peculiarities of the female temperament. So I will confess I was a little anxious to hear about this trouble he was having with the girl he was seeing, in case I hadn't anything useful to suggest. But I mention this merely as context. Don't concern yourself with this trouble of Chester's. That don't enter into it. As it turned out, we never got onto the subject of his sweetheart at all. Chester was in no hurry to. As I brought him his first whiskey, he was sat there trying to notice things around my apartment, out of courtesy to me I suppose. We bumped glasses, grinned at each other, and only then did Chester remember to tell me that I'd left my headlights on. I had come back from the shops just an hour before, you see. It had gotten just dark enough to put the lights on, but not quite dark enough to notice they're still on when you're getting out. But don't concern yourself with my leaving my headlights on. That don't enter into it either. The trouble really began when I returned from the street to find Chester staring nostalgically at an old photo on my wall. He asked me whether I remembered that day on the farm when I had chased a rabbit down its hole and got myself stuck. I said I was glad he eventually heard me calling for help. He suggested I was not more glad than the rabbits. We laughed. He swirled his whiskey, still merrily casting his mind back to those good old days. That was when he got us onto the fateful subject of this tree.

We had planted it in that same paddock, the one with the rabbit holes, under Grandpa's supervision.

"Now when you've got grandchildren of your own," he had told us, "this tiny tree will be bigger than the house. Maybe you'll build a tree hut for your grandchildren, so they can play in it. And you'll be able to tell them that you planted that great oak with your own two hands."

I've never forgotten that day with Grandpa. And neither had Chester. Because on the night in question, at my apartment, he said to me:

"That English Oak we planted with Grandpa: when did you last see it?"

“I haven’t been to the farm for probably three years now,” I said.
“It’s been much longer for me,” said Chester. “I didn’t get a chance to check on it last time I was there. How big do you reckon that tree is now?”

I will tell you how I responded to that question. But before I do that, there is something you need to understand about me.

This happened shortly after my birthday in November. And every November I set myself a resolution. I’m not always the most disciplined at sticking to them. Come to think of it, I’m not sure any have survived past Christmas. But I was determined to stick to this one. And what that required, my resolution last November, was to be certain of every claim I make. Now that may sound simple, but I can assure you it’s not. For one thing, by sticking to it, I find that I can’t make nearly as many claims. Identifying the ones you can’t make with absolute confidence is a profound tax on the brain. Take any ordinary claim. You’ve got to consider it ever so carefully from all angles, check whether the evidence supports it, and eventually work out whether the thing is confirmed, beyond any reasonable doubt.

With a bit of practice, you can learn to spot the claims that don’t hold water. Add to that the challenge of spotting those claims *before you make them*, and you’ve got yourself a whole world of difficulty. Makes you realise how careless we are in ordinary speech. I used to make all sorts of bold assertions. Had you suggested to the old cavalier Jim that music is better now than it was a few decades ago, he wouldn’t have hesitated to contradict you. Quite as if he could speak objectively on the subject.

But that was then. Last November gave birth to a new Jim. A Jim who is not reckless with the truth. A Jim who is far more honest about his ignorance. When this Jim speaks, he sticks faithfully to the proven facts. You will hear nothing that he is not as sure of as he can be of anything. At least, this is the ideal I have been striving to live up to. I should like to emphasise what an extraordinary feat it is for a mere mortal to pull off. But that, I am convinced, is precisely what I did when it came to discussing that tree. Yes, quite the worst bit in this whole ordeal with Chester, from my point of view, is that I am convinced I had lived up to this lofty ambition of mine.

When Chester asked me how big I reckon that tree is now, I took a moment. I made a point, before I said anything at all, of going through this very process: considering from all angles what I could know about this tree, sifting through the evidence, making

sure I don't commit myself in speech to anything I can't stand by with absolute confidence. After putting myself through all this, I looked over at Chester, who had since resumed his seat and inserted his nose into his glass of whiskey. I was going to make sure I could safely answer this loaded question. I looked over at my cousin, and responded by getting him to unload it:

"You mean right now? This very second?"

Chester removed his nose from the glass, with a frown. "Yes Jim. How big do you think it is right now?"

"I can't know anything about that English oak right now." The frown deepened, but I was undeterred. "Do you mean to ask how it would appear to us if we were, hypothetically, in that paddock gazing at it right now?"

"No, not hypothetically. I mean actually. I wasn't aware I had asked a question that's apt to be mocked. What would you say, objectively, is the size of that tree?"

"But how can I answer a question like that? I'd have to join you in supposing the tree you describe exists."

"Well why not?" I mustn't have answered quickly enough, because he went on: "You don't mean someone might have cut it down? Who would do such a thing?"

"I don't think there's any danger of that. I'm just admitting I don't know anything about an English oak existing at this moment."

"C'mon now Jim," said my cousin tolerantly. "I mean, supposing no one cut it down. Supposing nothing happened to it, except that it's continued that process trees go through of growing. How big might it be now? Go on, have a guess."

While he was always charming in his manner towards me, I do with hindsight notice a stubborn streak in old Chester. It made him reluctant to let even trifles like this go.

"I simply can't guess Chester, unless you can establish that there is a tree existing independently of us whose size I am guessing at."

At this Chester had a good chuckle, presumably hoping I would drop some kind of act.

"You alright there Jim?" he eventually asked. "What's the matter with you? Of course it exists. We planted it together, don't you remember?"

"Sure I remember planting a tree with you Chester," I said, beginning to notice a wounded expression on my cousin's face. "I don't doubt it existed then." The crease in his brow, today such a familiar sight, persuaded me that I had better come clean about my resolution before continuing with my end of the conversation.

Thinking it would help matters, I explained it to him, just as I have now to you.

"So, you see, I know all about my own experiences of that tree. But I am not about to be so bold as to make proclamations about it from my apartment, as if about something existing beyond my awareness."

"You promise you're not pulling my leg? But really, Jim. You mean to say you're not willing to claim that oak is stretching out its branches and leaves as we speak?"

I shook my head solemnly.

"Are you a betting man Jim?" he said only half jokingly. "For heaven's sake, explain to me your reluctance to say anything sensible about it."

"Well Chester, it's like this."

His eyebrows leapt. Beneath them, he groped for the bottle of whiskey and started to pour himself a tall glass. Overlooking this uncharacteristic breach of etiquette, I proceeded with conviction. I had been musing at length along these lines just the day before. All it took now was for me to substitute in the tree.

"If I consider how I come to know about an object, such as that English oak, it is by my senses alone. When I was last in the paddock, I saw that tree, which is to say I knew what it looked like. I believe I went and placed a hand on it's trunk, which is to say I knew how it felt to the touch. If its leaves had rustled or its branches creaked, then I knew what it sounded like. But what else can I possibly know about that tree, besides these sensory experiences I have of it? How can any of my experiences tell me about a tree existing independently of me?"

"How can they tell you about the tree independently of you," Chester repeated distantly. Then he blinked a few times and returned his glass to the table. "Well sure, you learn about the tree by using your senses. You experience the tree. I grant it. But it's not as if you're back where you started once you leave the farm and return to the city. Naturally, you take the facts about the tree with you. Heck, I mean, you said yourself that you remember seeing and touching the thing."

"I was telling you about my experiences of the tree three years ago. I can say nothing beyond my experiences, which means I can say nothing about any tree existing now."

"But of course you can. What's become of you old pal? Talking like a confused Nun. As I say, you're as entitled as the next fellow to take what you've learned with you. Why, I suppose the most basic

thing you can learn about a tree is that it exists. Once you've learned that, you know it. Even from your apartment. Surely you don't deny yourself that..."

"But I do."

Chester's face dropped.

"How can I know," I said, "that the tree exists when I'm not perceiving it? My knowledge of the tree is nothing more than my sensory experiences of it."

A possibility struck Chester. "Listen, Jim, you haven't been taking to heart that age-old question concerning the tree that fell when there was no one present to hear it, have you?" He looked at me like a concerned relative. "You do realise that gets asked in jest, don't you old pal?"

"Well it ought to be taken far more seriously," was my reply.

When he had recovered from this remark, Chester marshalled himself. "The way you're talking about trees, it's as if you mean something different to everyone else. Am I to understand that when you call something a tree, you're actually referring not to something sticking out of the ground, but your own head?"

When I tell you that I spent a few long moments reflecting on what a tree is to me, while Chester grew visibly restless, it goes to show that even the most simple things are not as straightforward as they seem when you're trying to be absolutely sure of them.

"I'm saying that what I call a tree is a category of sensory experiences I have had or can expect to have: of seeing something sticking out of the ground, of feeling the coolness of the shade beneath it, of watching leaves fall gently to the ground. A tree is just the label I use for what those experiences all have in common. In talking about the English oak, it seems to me we're both just labelling our experiences of planting it and the experiences we have when we visit the spot where we planted it.

One of us was rather satisfied with my answer, and it wasn't my cousin. He ran a hand through his hair, and exhaled loudly. "Is it just trees with you?" he asked, much like a physician trying to determine how far his patient's affliction has spread. "I mean, do you feel this way about other things?"

"Oh rather. In fact, just yesterday I was sitting here thinking about the things in my kitchen cupboard."

I paused to investigate a strange wheezing noise. It was coming from Chester, as if he'd just prevented four runs with his stomach.

I'm prepared to believe it was involuntary, but I thought it poor form nonetheless.

"And when I refer to the things in my kitchen cupboard," I continued, "I'm referring to nothing more than the experiences that are possible once the cupboard door is open. Beyond that," and at this point I may have straightened my posture, "I freely confess to knowing nothing about anything existing in my kitchen cupboard. Such is my humility."

Chester snorted. He seemed amused. Then, with an intrigued glance in the direction of my kitchen, he got to his feet.

"Which one?" Resting his glass on the counter, he approached my cupboard. "This cupboard here?" He took a good peek inside and then, closing the cupboard door softly, rose with a decidedly expressionless face. "Just to confirm," he said from behind the counter, "you're saying, old pal, that you don't know whether there's anything at all in here?"

"That's right. I don't know what you're so excited about."

"So you're prepared to entertain the possibility that it's empty?"

"I'm prepared to entertain the possibility that there is nothing within it that exists in this moment."

"I see. And if I was to give you good odds, say 50 to 1, that there is in fact something in here, would be willing to put some money on it?"

"That would be pointless."

"Be a sport."

"What I mean is we could never settle it. We both know that we're capable of seeing and touching my plates and bowls by opening the cupboard. That is not what I'm doubting. What I'm doubting is that anything exists inside that cupboard while that door is closed - while we are not having any experiences we call plates and bowls."

"Let me see if I've got this straight," he said, returning to his seat. "You mean to tell me that what's preventing you from talking like an ordinary person - like the Jim I used to know - about such ordinary things as your own crockery is the possibility that they cease to exist once out of your sight. And reach. And earshot."

"That doesn't quite sound right."

"No, of course not. That would be a preposterous suggestion."

"It depends what it means for my crockery to exist."

Chester snorted again, and began nodding sarcastically. I might have sounded like he had me on the run, but I only needed to be clear on the point in order to answer him faithfully.

"They don't cease to exist in the sense I mean," I said, "which is that we can have the sensory experiences that we apply the label 'Jim's crockery' to. And that's the only sense in which I know about them. What more do you know about them?"

"I jolly well know, without seeing or touching them, that they are in your cupboard. About as in your cupboard as anything could be."

"But what do you mean when you say they are in my cupboard?"

Watching Chester wrestle reluctantly with this question, I tried to assist. "If you mean you're capable of retrieving them, then we agree. But if you're suggesting that those plates and bowls are things in their own right that exist independently of you experiencing them, then tell me what evidence you have to support that. What am I missing here?"

"Really Jim. This is too much. Who's twisted sense of humour is responsible for this routine? One of my meddling siblings? Look," he said, hunching forward, "if you'll swear you're not pulling my leg, I will try to understand how you've gotten yourself in this terrible muddle. Because it's really starting to concern me."

"I'm quite serious."

"Okay." Chester pushed his glass aside and began to apply his formidable intellect to the task. He went to one of those elitist British universities, I forget which one, and in his spare time there got first class honours, with distinction. His mother is constantly reminding us.

"So what you're denying yourself is that trees and plates - let's stick with plates - are things existing distinctly from your experience of them."

"You've got it Chester!"

"That's why you aren't thinking of them as things that go in and out of existence. It's more that you have experiences of them—"

"plate-related experiences."

"...that you have plate-related experiences at some times and not at other times. And having these experiences is all there is to your knowledge of plates."

"Precisely."

"To that extent I finally understand your position."

"Capital, my dear cousin. Capital."

"And now, because I've always been fond of you Jim, I will make it my solemn duty to cure you of this ridiculous delusion."

"Oh," I said.

"Of this highly unusual disease of the mind, which I can only assume you've picked up from reading too much of the deranged

writings of those so-called philosophers. As a close relative, I cannot in good conscience leave you in this hopeless state, unable to comment on anything that isn't positively arresting your attention."

It was my turn to notice the tide had gone out in my glass of whiskey.

2

"To begin with, why don't you try thinking a little less deeply. Don't be offended now. The reason I suggest that is because the disease doesn't appear to be affecting your actions yet, and therefore the level of thinking responsible for behaving normally."

"What do you mean?"

Here I must ask you to forgive me. I recall now that my leaving my headlights on does come into it, after all. I should've known there was a reason that trip outside stands out in my memory of this most unfortunate visit from cousin Chester. Indeed, he brought my headlights quite into the centre of the dispute by talking as follows.

"You say you lack this knowledge of things outside of your experience. But then you reveal that very knowledge through your own actions."

At the time, I admit this accusation startled me. But you wouldn't have known it from my expression.

"Did you not, just an hour ago" said Chester, "possess the knowledge that there was a car out front, existing quite apart from your experience of it even though it belongs to you, and that its headlights were on?" Before I could answer, he added: "How else do you explain your leaving the apartment to turn them off, other than that you did so in this knowledge?"

It was a few moments, before I could safely proceed. "I certainly acted on my knowledge..."

"Hah."

"But all I knew was that if I were to go out front I could have certain car-related experiences. I was also acting on the knowledge that if I turned my headlights off then I'd be less likely to have unpleasant car-related experiences tomorrow when I try to take it to the races."

"Have you listened to yourself recently Jim? You're becoming more eccentric with age."

"You think so?"

“Without question. Though, I suppose if this disease doesn’t show any signs of actually threatening your judgment, then perhaps its not quite as dire as I thought. It seems to me,” he suggested hopefully, “that you may have simply adjusted your manner of speaking. You seem to be putting ‘your experience’ in front of everything, and using ‘if’s where you should be using things like ‘is’s. If that’s all it costs you, then maybe you’re not a total basket case after all Jim.”

“I get by just the same,” I said. “When I stop to reflect on it, I’m not sure the ‘if’s as you put it, really cost me anything. I’m just describing rules.”

“Rules?”

“Yes rules. Or laws, if you prefer. The rules by which I expect to have one experience or another. Car-starting versus car-not-starting experiences, depending on experiences that go before, such as headlight-switching-on and headlight-switching-off experiences. These are the rules we forget to thank for giving a certain structure and coherence to our experiences. Where we understand the rules we can use them to make predictions. Take this coffee table, for instance. It’s dimensions and position are revealed to you by vision. And because you know the rules about dimensions, relative position and all that - without needing a degree in physics - you can very easily work out what movements of your body will result in coffee-table-touching versus coffee-table-missing experiences.”

Chester seized up, and appeared to resent that he had left his glass on the table.

“And here’s another one you’ll be familiar with. Inanimate objects, such as crockery, are usually to be found in the place where I or somebody else left them, such as my cupboard. These are just the most basic ones. Some of the rules operating in combination are so complex that they don’t seem like rules at all. If I visit the English oak and find it toppled over, and half buried in mud, I may say there was a landslide. But all I would mean is that my experience can be explained by a bunch of rules. I won’t always be able to name them. But there will be some combination of them that tells you a toppled over tree is just what you’ll find if, before you should visit, the area has been getting a certain amount of rainfall, and the gradient of the land is such that as many tonnes of soil give way around the tree as are liable to topple it over when its roots are only so established, and so forth. So with my resolution, I’m trying to stick to describing the rules that govern my

experiences, rather than introducing these extra things that are supposed to exist outside my experience. Things I cannot possibly know about, precisely because they are outside my experience. You say I'm putting 'my experience' in front of everything when in fact, to my way of thinking, it is you who is removing it from the front of everything. Before my birthday I was doing that too. I would wander around thinking I was getting directly acquainted with these objects I encountered . . . Well take that English oak, for instance. The last time I was at the farm, I marvelled at the sight of it, wandered up and patted it with a proud hand, quite convinced there was nothing between me and that magnificent specimen."

"So it was in good form?"

"Standing probably a solid ten metres tall. Good foliage. The point is that I wasn't directly acquainted with an English oak. I was acquainted with certain sensory information that, on Grandpa's advice, I came to label an English oak. I was mistaking my tree-seeing and tree-touching experiences for an actual tree. I had removed my experience from the equation, when in fact it was the only thing in the equation."

My cousin was stroking his chin rather thoughtfully.

"It's much going to the cinema," I continued. "At first you're aware you're looking at a screen, until you're so seduced by the world being depicted on the screen that the screen itself, the medium, escapes your attention. Well, in much the same way, from a very young age I suppose, we stop seeing the sensory information for what it is and instead see only what it describes to us."

"Well, perhaps not the most farcical thing you've said so far. In fact, I can even see what you mean. But let me ask you this: to borrow your analogy, what is it that makes the world depicted on screen so engaging to the audience? I'll tell you what. It's the fact that the things being depicted actually exist, or did so recently, because they were filmed and are now displayed before you. You're still making the most laughable error in rejecting these 'extra things' existing outside your experience."

"I don't mind being laughed at," I said. And this, I believe, was the one lapse in my concentration. I wanted it to be true, but events subsequently have proved otherwise.

"Take these rules you speak of. The rules according to which you'll feel a coffee table if you place your hand where you see a coffee table, or experience your car starting in future if you don't leave your jolly headlights on. Sure, there are rules that determine

which experiences you'll have. But I ask you again to look beyond your own skull, dense though it may be, for an explanation. How has it not occurred to you that these rules affect your experiences by virtue of the fact they govern the objects that you experience? We call them laws of nature because they apply to things in the natural world Jim. Don't you see?"

"I do see. At least I understand the custom of talking about these rules as if they apply to things outside of my experience. But it still seems to me that if I adopted that view I'd be making a commitment I don't need to, and one I don't see that I can afford. I'd be committing myself to the existence of more things than I know about and can ever hope to know about. I'd have to claim that there exist not only my own sensory experiences, and these observable rules, but also a third category of countless things obeying those rules independently of my experience and therefore entirely outside my knowledge."

"I'm starting to wonder whether you even want to be liberated from this prison of your own experiences. You seem to like the notion that it all rests on you. Well I'm sorry but it doesn't. There's an entire scientific community, don't you know, out there studying the third category of things for you. They probably wouldn't bother if they suspected everyone was as ungrateful as you. But they're constantly making new discoveries and able to tell us more about the behaviour of things in the natural world. And sometimes without even observing them, because these things leave evidence of their existence. Why, our great aunt Elaine was an archaeologist. You're not suggesting she toiled in vain are you, wasted her long career meticulously piecing together facts about what creatures were knocking about thousands of years ago?"

"And how do scientists like our late great aunt Elaine come across that evidence?"

"You want me to tell you about the scientific method?"

"Surely it is by their senses. They're no different to me, in that, even scientists rely at some point on having sensory experiences to find out about the 'natural world'. And when they report these discoveries to us, we learn about them through the experience of reading or listening to those reports. There's no getting away from it Chester."

"Not if you insist!"

"But what harm is actually done? You really needn't be concerned for me."

“Hard to be concerned about a prisoner who has fallen for his captor.”

“What is my disadvantage exactly? I can still learn something useful by reading about the latest medical research on, say, the relationship between exercise and brain function. But what I’ve learned about is not my brain in the sense you would understand it, but simply another rule. I will have learned about some relationship between my experiences in future. That if I spend more of my time getting a good pant going, I’m more likely to have experiences of excelling at maths, or whatever it is.”

By this point my cousin looked disinterested. He was calmly swirling his whiskey. Without looking up, he eventually spoke. “If that is the way you choose to view the world, that’s up to you. You’re fundamentally mistaken, of course, but who am I to talk you out of it? I only have rationality on my side.”

Now there’s nothing that gets under my skin more than being viewed as unwilling to entertain other points of view. After all, in my state of humble ignorance about all things, I am nothing if not grateful for any scarce facts or lines of reasoning I can come across. “Show me what I’m missing then Chester,” I insisted, and perhaps I sounded a little short.

Still refusing to meet my gaze, he examined the underside of his glass with a conceited air. “The simple difference between us, Jim, is that I can explain why I have sensory experiences and you cannot.”

3

“I can tell you just what caused you to have those tree-related experiences of the English oak when you were last at the farm.”

“Let me guess...”

“An English oak. Who could deny that the best explanation for your experience of the tree, is the tree itself, existing out there in the world, whether or not you are there to perceive it? As explanations go, it is rather elegant for its simplicity don’t you think? Whereas, to explain your experiences without committing yourself to a ‘third category’ of things, you’d have to resort to something far more fanciful. Some form of trickery I suppose. Well, what do you suggest? A simulation of some sort?”

“I don’t see any need for that. Like I’ve been saying, for each of my experiences, there is generally some combination of rules that explain how I got from my previous experiences to that one.”

"Is that really as far as you go? That's hardly a satisfactory explanation. You're saying what causes you to see this table is your previous experiences of the table and the rule that says it hasn't grown legs and run away! What is it that sustains these experiences and these rules? Clearly there is something behind them. Something reliable and indifferent to you, sitting behind your experiences. Because they're not happening at random, nor according to your own will. It's not as if you decide how the table appears to you. So what is acting to produce that image?"

In the time I spent thinking it over, Chester leaned back in his chair with a smugness I found very distracting, to put it mildly. And then I saw the insidious assumption he had smuggled into his question.

"But why should we assume that behind each of our sensory experiences there is something causing them to occur? Let's not go looking for these causes unless we have some basis for expecting there are any, much less for hoping to find them."

Finally my cousin looked at me, and shook his head spitefully. "What new lows of desperation you're sinking to. It's shameful to witness. Of course our experiences are caused. I mean, really, how could they not be? I'm finding it increasingly hard to accept I'm related to someone who can talk such drivel. Even a child can see that everything is caused by something else. Just you try to name me one thing that isn't."

"Why don't you name me one thing you know *is* caused by something else? You're making that sound so easy."

"Because I asked you first."

"Well I put it to you that by naming anything you think is caused, you'd only be naming your own experience, or some knowledge acquired from your own experience. Of course, you'd be trying to name material things that are caused by other material things. But their existence is the very thing in question. So you're arguing in a circle."

"And you're arguing in square. A tiny square, which no light can penetrate and in which maddening ideas are left to roam about unchecked. And when you briefly poke your head out, you sound like a crazed dictator intoxicated by his own propaganda."

"I thought we were reasoning with each other."

"Ah, but each according to his abilities. I mean, experience is the very thing that teaches us - at least anyone with their head properly screwed on - that everything we encounter is caused and can be explained by some events that preceded it. How can I get

this into that tiny square you occupy . . . You've played snooker, have you not? Well there you have a clear case of one thing acting on another, causing it to move. If you studied the second ball's trajectory, orientation and velocity you - well perhaps not you specifically - a sane person could describe the cause of its movement in detail. And in theory it's the same with everything else in the natural world."

"How does any of that help though, Chester? You're still offering me no way to be sure that anything is caused. I agree that objects of experience appear to causally interact with me and each other. But appearances are one thing. How am I any closer to knowledge of causes? All I know is that some relationship holds between the experiences I have over time. All I am observing is the operation of rules that determine what sensory experiences I will have. Tell me: what more can I know?"

"The problem with your obsession with knowledge is that anything can be doubted if you try hard enough. You're holding yourself to an impossible standard, and doing so produces these absurd results. Which leads me to ask - purely out of curiosity, rather than any interest in helping you avoid being mocked by imbeciles with more commonsense than you - why can't there be a place in your desolate mind for useful things like beliefs and inferences? Without them it's no wonder you get into a tangle when it comes to finding an explanation for your experience of seeing an English oak, even if it is an explanation that can be doubted by someone with this perversion of yours and far too much time on their hands."

"Well as someone who is so far managing without these inferences, I have to say, I'm finding it is quite the reverse. My restraint seems to save me such a lot of unnecessary trouble. It's liberating. If I don't lower the standard, as it were, and allow myself the belief that my rule-following experiences must be caused by something, then I don't need to make further inferences in order to back one of the candidates. It seems to me the more beliefs you form, the more you have to add in order to plug the gaps, the complexities compounding with every step. Why burden myself with all that? What do we get in return? I don't know we expect anything in return. We're just falling into the trap of assuming that our experiences, the sensory information we are presented with, are *about* something. Or, more likely, we forget that what we're getting is information and mistake the information for what it appears to

be about. We make no distinction between our experiences and these things we think cause them. We forget the mind is an island.”

“How very convenient for you. I can see how it is liberating to not look for causes. In the same way it is liberating to feign illness and take the day off work so that you can have a nice lie in. It’s downright lazy. You’ve gotten pathetically weak in the head.”

“But I ask you again, what’s the use? Where does this process of requiring an explanation for everything get you? Consider what’s at the end of it. Eventually you work your way back to the beginning of the universe, and have to wonder what caused it. You eventually confront Leibniz’s famous question: ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ Insert some explanation, a deity perhaps, and the same can be asked of that. Eventually, like a parent fed up with an inquisitive child, every creed must assert that something exists without having been caused by something. What does a man of science like yourself say caused the universe to exist?”

“What caused the formation of the universe?”

“Yes.”

“Well you won’t get an answer to that question, and not simply because you don’t deserve one. The universe just exists. To ask why is a nonsense. It’s like asking what is north of the North Pole.”

“Well that’s just how I feel about you asking why we have these sensory experiences that we observe to follow rules. Perhaps we just have them, and that’s all there is to it.”

“That’s not how it works I’m afraid,” he said, his lip curling. “You can’t just reach that natural resting point at your convenience. There’s a good reason why it’s a nonsense to need the existence of the universe explained. There’s a very important difference between explaining things existing in the universe and trying to do the same of the universe itself. Only a fool hopes that the existence of space and time could ever be explained from within space and time.”

“And that’s just how I feel about my sensory experiences. I just have them. To ask why is a nonsense. I can try to explain a given experience by asking what previous ones and rules have produced it, but I would be a fool to think there is some external cause of my experiences that I could hope to find from within them, as the person having them.”

In the silent moments that followed, I noticed Chester’s knee beginning to bob up and down excitedly. His whole body appeared to be coming to the boil.

“Sounds like a miserable existence to me,” he said, through gritted teeth. “And perhaps that’s just what you deserve. I would like now to forget that you and I are related. And if there is one rule you should learn about it’s a little-known rule according to which Jim acting like an incorrigible tit produces the following experience.” With this my cousin stood abruptly, walked around to my side of the coffee table and kicked me firmly in the shin.

I gasped. The pain immediately arrested all my attention. After remaining for a few moments to callously watch me hold my leg in disbelief, Chester turned and headed for the exit. On his way through my kitchen, he managed to pull the cupboard door so violently that it came clean off. I suppose he took it with him to limit my opportunities to doubt the existence of my crockery.

I wouldn’t dream of doing anything to colour your verdict on this disagreement between us, but it may interest you to know that, two days later, a letter arrived from Chester. It read as follows:

James,

Seeing as I left so abruptly, I thought I should write to thank you for letting me keep my boots on during my last visit. My last visit is precisely what it was. I hope your leg has a ghastly bruise on it. And if anyone were to ask you what was the cause of it, I would endorse wholeheartedly your view that you just have the experiences that you do, and to ask after explanations outside your experience is a nonsense.

*Not yours
Chester*